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Generalist Function in Intelligence Analysis

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Abstract

While there has been an increasing need to integrate and synthesize the rapidly expanding complexity within intelligence analysis, there has developed an antithetical contemporary de-emphasis of generalist orientation and function that can decrease analytical effectiveness. Increases in knowledge and information have naturally led to an increased demand for specialization with consequent increased influence of specialty experts, but this has been at the expense of generalist function, which is becoming increasingly limited to progressively higher administrative levels. A generalist is more than an individual with an eclectic background, rather, successful generalists are best understood by their functional characteristics which include a broad scope of competencies, complex decision making abilities, the ability to function well in an environment of uncertainty, and an orientation toward action. The expanded cognitive framework of the successful generalist is necessary for the recognition of actionable intelligence from multiple seemingly disparate sources, but a decrease in generalist function can lead to a lack of the innovation that is necessary for the analytical recognition of analogous correlations of data. Generalist vulnerabilities are also examined, and recommendations are made for increasing generalist orientation and influence.

1. Introduction

Increased emphasis on generalist orientation and function is needed in intelligence analysis because increases in specialist prominence have resulted in a lessening of generalist influence. Generalist intelligence decisions involve multiple disciplines, and it is the generalist that integrates various aspects of analysis into the organization's mission and goals. That function traditionally has been intuitively performed at all organizational levels, but society's emphasis on technical specialty training has reduced awareness of the importance of generalist activity at all but the highest administrative levels. Authors have expressed recognition that complex fields have need for generalist decision making^{1 2}, but there has been little in depth examination of the concept of the generalist, or of how such a concept would be implemented. It is not enough to consider that a generalist is simply one with an eclectic background. Rather, consideration must be given to the generalist's functional abilities, and in order to properly integrate the generalist into the operations of an organization, the generalist orientation must also be understood in relation to that of the specialist.

¹ Sylves, Richard, Ph.D. and William R. Cumming, J.D. 2004. "FEMA's Path to Homeland Security: 1979-2003." *Journal of Homeland Security and Emergency Management*, Volume 1, Issue 2, Article 11.

² Gordon, Paula. February 2002. "International Relations and National Agendas After September 11, 2001." *PA Times*. (A publication of the American Society for Public Administration.) Vol. 25, Issue2.

2. Generalist Function

The generalist is better understood by function than simply by training. Generalist function is the means by which broad perspective conceptual frameworks are defined, maintained, and expanded. This is because the development of new conceptual frameworks involves the integration and synthesis of seemingly disparate pieces of information into a new big picture. Because everyone functions as a generalist to some extent, in less complex environments it was easier for organizational leadership to successfully accomplish this process and disseminate concepts down the organizational structure. However, in increasingly complex environments, such as exists today with the rapid expansion of knowledge and information, organizational leadership struggles to synthesize information that is esoteric to them, into conceptual frameworks. This is especially problematic as generalist orientation and function becomes increasingly limited to administrative levels.

Increases in knowledge and information naturally necessitate a rise in the number and influence of specialty experts, however, this has been increasingly at the expense of the generalist orientation which provides the expanded conceptual framework necessary for the successful analysis of new knowledge and information, and provides for the development of appropriate response to the results of such analysis. The preservation and expansion of generalist capabilities is important for the promotion of the sound judgment and appropriate innovation that stems from eclectic capabilities, but as specialty expert capabilities and accomplishments have waxed, societal recognition of the nature and value of the generalist function has waned to low ebb. The 9/11 Commission's report on the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 recognized that no effective response was made to the multiple pieces of actionable intelligence that might have predicted those attacks, because of a failure to recognize the larger complex picture of the terrorists' scheme. The Commission acknowledged the need for generalist function to recognize such a larger complex picture when it bemoaned the absence of an "attending physician" to organize the intelligence team into effective analysis and response³, but the Commission showed poor understanding of such a physician's generalist function in its recommendation for further centralization of intelligence activities. While this recommendation of the Commission may be appropriate for other reasons, in itself it does little to advance true generalist function within the intelligence structure, because the generalist function of such an "attending physician" is not a hierarchical administrative function.

³9/11 Commission. 2004. *9/11 Commission Report*. page 353. "The agencies are like a set of specialists in a hospital, each ordering tests, looking for symptoms, and prescribing medications. What is missing is the attending physician who makes sure they work as a team."

3. Characteristics

Successfully functioning generalists are better described by their functional characteristics, rather than by their training or experiences. The characteristics of a successfully functioning generalist include a broad scope of competencies, complex decision making ability, ability to function well in an uncertain environment, and an orientation toward action. These characteristics combine to allow for a broad and expandable conceptual framework that allows the generalist to innovatively recognize analogous correlations and appropriately act upon them from any level within an organization, and thus actionable intelligence is less likely to be filtered out at successive levels. Because society has become less conscious of generalist function, for the generalist to be effective, the role of the generalist must be consciously recognized and authorized within an organization.

3.1 Broad Scope of Competencies

The most recognizable characteristic of the generalist is a broad scope of competencies. Eclectic academic accomplishment is a prerequisite for the contemporary generalist intelligence analyst, and because of the increasing technological nature of the world, demonstrated competency in technical sciences should be considered equally as necessary as understanding and accomplishment in social sciences. Real world experience in utilizing academic knowledge must validate academic accomplishments, but the scope of competencies of the generalist necessarily include more than scholarly achievements. A working knowledge of governmental, legal, and political concerns is a constant requirement. Generalists must be able to communicate effectively with individuals of all levels within the organization, exhibit appropriate leadership abilities, and possess the psychosocial understanding and interpersonal skills that facilitate their function. But possession of a broad scope of competencies of itself does not guarantee successful function as a generalist.

3.2 Complex Decision Making Ability

The generalist characteristic of complex decision making ability stems from the ability to recognize analogous correlations within the broad conceptual framework of eclectic competencies. Such decision making involves evaluating large amounts of (often conflicting) research information for validity and relevance, and integrating it with real world data, while weighing considerations of psychosocial, governmental, and legal factors. Often times the opinions of subordinates, superiors, and subject matter experts must also be considered and factored into the decision making process. Generalist decision making is concerned with a holistic view of large scale conceptual frameworks, whereas specialist concern is more focused at a relatively narrow portion of that framework, thereby specialist function is more of a skill function than it is a judgment function. The successful generalist is expert

enough in each narrow portion of the conceptual framework to allow many judgments to be made without specialist consultation, to allow judgments as to proper utilization of the specialist, and to understand the difference between specialist skill and specialist opinion.

3.3 Ability to Function Well in an Environment of Uncertainty

The successful generalist has the ability to function well in an environment of uncertainty, and it is in such an environment that the generalist function is most valuable. It is often a lack of data that generates uncertainty for the intelligence analyst, but it is in such a situation that the larger scope of reference of the eclectic generalist allows multiple analogous correlations to be recognized and weighted without the preconceived biases of specialty experts.⁴ It is the generalist who, given an uncertain (low data) circumstance, can best identify risks and stratify them as to likelihood and potential impact. This can be best illustrated by a medical analogy of a worried patient seeking diagnosis and treatment of a vague illness from multiple medical specialists. Each of the medical specialists naturally would view the patient's complaints from the perspective of their own specialty, each would convince the patient that the illness could best be addressed through their own respective discipline, and each specialist finds a different area to diagnose and treat. In the end the patient has expended resources on multiple diagnostic tests and treatments, and is more confused than ever as to the cause of the illness. A generalist physician, on the other hand, could identify and assess the risk of each of the potential causes of the malady in relation with the other potential causes, with higher confidence, utilizing less data, and utilizing fewer resources.

3.4 Orientation Toward Action

The generalist position must be understood to primarily be a position of action. Not only does the generalist analyze information, the generalist also initiates action as appropriate to the analysis. Such action is initiated on the judgment of the generalist, and might include further exploration of a problem, effecting solution to a problem within appropriate capabilities, notification of others of a situation, and consultations. However, the most difficult, and one of the most important, actions initiated by the generalist are active decisions to do nothing about potential situations that the generalist has judged to be of relatively low risk of incidence and/or consequence. It is in this realm

⁴ Heuer, Richards J. 1999. *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*. Center for the Study of Intelligence, Central Intelligence Agency. Chapter 1, page 3.

"The disadvantage of a mind-set is that it can color and control our perception to the extent that an experienced specialist may be among the last to see what is really happening when events take a new and unexpected turn."

of risk management that the generalist function proves most valuable.

4. Reestablishing Generalist Orientation

Several measures should be taken to reestablish generalist orientation in a complex organization that perceives a deficiency in this function. The organization must first develop a corporate understanding of its need for generalist function, and a decision must be made to actively promote a generalist orientation. Appropriate candidates for such function should be selected and trained for positions within the organization. Selection criteria should include a well rounded course of academic study that includes both technical and social science, demonstrated not only by academic excellence, but also by achievement of expert level vocational function in such areas. Individuals with overly specialized academic or vocational experiences may not be well suited for generalist function. Appropriately selected candidates should then receive both didactic and practical analytical training to round out and expand their current capabilities as they relate to all levels of the organization and its mission. Those individuals who have been selected and trained to function in a generalist capacity should be positioned throughout all the levels of the organization because their skills are appropriate to any level, and they should be empowered to enable timely initiation of action when appropriate. Individuals of generalist function must also be secured in their positions within the organization, because of the vulnerabilities of the generalist orientation.

5. Generalist Vulnerabilities

The decline in emphasis upon generalist orientation is related to the vulnerabilities of the generalist, and this decline is associated with loss of holistic innovative thought. There are several vulnerabilities of the generalist that must be recognized and compensated for, in order to sustain the function of such individuals over time. Because successful generalists tend to intensely self-evaluate their judgments and performance, they are sensitive to criticism, but experience developed over time tends to lessen this vulnerability. Narrowly focused criticism from specialists is a special case that is often difficult to refute, but must be considered in light of the fact that generalists must operate as experts in many areas without a specialist orientation. There is also a tendency for generalists to become "pigeon holed" into narrow functions that they perform well, but in which generalist orientation plays little or no role. Institutional bias toward specialist orientation is another vulnerability of the generalist, because leaders impose their values on organizations thru decision making processes⁵,

⁵ Wally, S. and R. Baum. 1994. "Personal and Structural Determinants of the Pace of Strategic Decision Making." *The Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 37, pages 932-956.

and as specialists tend to move into leadership positions, decision making processes are established that favor the specialist orientation over the generalist orientation. Even though generalist influence lessens in such situations, it is here that the generalist orientation is needed most because specialist influence begins to move the organization in directions that do not take into account the overall conceptual frameworks. The most telling symptom of such a loss of generalist influence is found in failures that stem from a lack of ingenuity or creativity, because such ingenuity proceeds from those broader conceptual frameworks. Herein lies the reason that large corporations trend away from ingenuity and creativity, and herein lies the reason for the “failure in imagination” that the 9/11 Commission Report sees as a main component of the intelligence deficiencies that contributed to the terrorist attacks of 2001.⁶

6. Conclusion

Traditionally, generalist functions have been performed intuitively at all organizational levels, but as institutional specialist influence has increased along with rapid increases in knowledge and information, higher administrative levels have been less able to efficiently perform such generalist functions due to increased demands for generalist services that are no longer being performed at lower levels in the organization. The 9/11 Commission recognized the need for greater generalist influence in its call for an “attending physician” to coordinate agencies that performed as specialists, and its call for further centralization of intelligence activities demonstrated its understanding of where such coordination increasingly is being performed. What is unrecognized is the gap between the increasing need for generalist function, and available generalist capabilities that are becoming increasingly restricted to the higher levels of administrative function.

Generalist orientation and function means more to an intelligence organization than simply analysts with eclectic backgrounds. The generalist functional characteristics of broad scope of competencies, complex decision making ability, ability to function well in an uncertain environment, and an orientation toward action, combine to enable recognition of, and action upon, analogous correlations of data within broad conceptual frameworks. Conscious emphasis on promotion of generalist orientation, function, and influence at all organizational levels is necessary to maintain an organizational advantage of successful intelligence analysis in the increasingly complex situations of today.

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⁶ 9/11 Commission. 2004. *9/11 Commission Report*. page 339. “We believe the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failures: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.”